

THE VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW

VOL. 9 APRIL 1933 No. 2

THE SOUTH AND TRADITION

BY JOHN PEALE BISHOP

IT REQUIRES a certain temerity to approach the Southern tradition. And yet I do not think that many persons, except a few old ladies and Mr. Joseph Hergesheimer, are likely to lose themselves in moonlight on the wet lawns, lamenting the lost valor, or wandering among the neglected box-trees to let themselves assume romance under the vanished colonnades. On the contrary, we suspect the past. We do not want a history of the South that points up the gallant Confederates and forgets the Colonel's mulatto daughter. Ours is a generation that, having been through a later than the Civil War, likes to believe the worst of everybody. So that when we search old closets it is more often to come out with a skeleton than carrying the remnants of grandmother's wedding gown.

Yet when we really begin to think about the closet and its contents, we know that the skeleton was once a man and that grandmother's wedding dress, for all the quaint cut of the sleeves and the yellowing color of the satin, belonged to a

woman. We see that bed to which she came as a bride: there she was to suffer childbirth, and when she was carried from it she went feet first. And grandfather, too, though he had his faults, was once alive. His economy may have been worse than his morals; he may, if he were a Virginian, have come to the conclusion about the time of his marriage, that is to say, somewhere around 1850, that the only way he could make both ends meet was to encourage the breeding of the blacks. Yet, when we have listened to the scholars who have lately been at the records and have examined the account-books, not passing the papers in the secret drawer or omitting to uproot the family tree, even when we have heard the full scandal of statistics relating to grandfather, we still know, not only that he was alive, but that he had arrived at a manner of living somewhat more amiable than any other that has ever been known on this continent.

This life continued the English social tradition, and was in many aspects as crude as country existence under Queen Anne. It had been adapted to the climate, which was warm and republican; but it kept a provincial look. The White Sulphur Springs may be made to do duty for Bath, but there was no city to take the place of London. The roads were bad. Yet there was ease, and, as in eighteenth-century England, a surprising polish. When in her carriage grandmother passed an acquaintance, she knew that her bow must be a bend of her whole haughty back and not a mere nod of the head. And in her kitchen, where so many concessions had to be made to the African fondness for grease, the hand-copied recipes were many, varied, and elaborate. For the South, whatever may be said, had at least passed those two tests which the French have devised for a civilization and to which they admit only themselves and the Chinese. It had devised a code of etiquette and created a native cookery.

There could have been neither, had grandfather been, as most of his compatriots were, forever on the move. But he

was attached to the land and from it and the remembered experience of the past he had arranged his living in quite another fashion than the industrial East and the wandering West. And he was quite aware of the difference. So much so that when circumstances pressed to war, he could, along with General Lee, refer to the opposing Americans simply as "those people." No phrase could show a greater alienation. However, his own way satisfied him and he was quite prepared to fight for it. Since slavery was a part of his system, he would defend slavery. And so he did, with what effort is known.

That is, of course, our fictional grandfather did. But to keep the record straight and not run away from the unforgivable fact, I must put it down that my own Virginian progenitor did not fight. He was, in 1861, though still comparatively young, so far advanced in corpulency that he could only with the greatest difficulty move from the front porch. He saw a neighbor of his, quite as fat as he, drive off one morning, whipping down the road, to join the cavalry in a one-horse buggy. But he did not emulate him.

Yet combatant or not, he held to his tradition. We are so accustomed to take it for granted that this is what the Southerner would do, that we forget how strange this was in America. For though for the country as a whole there are traditions of a sort (as in our foreign policy, for example) they are not there as aids to living. And this is the use of customs, courteous manners, and inherited wisdom. While there is always much that a young man must, of necessity, face in complete nakedness without so much as a tatter from the past, it is not a very profitable way to go through life. It means an emotional impoverishment. To have to learn everything for one's self is, as Ben Jonson remarked, to have a fool for a master.

And yet nothing is more common for Americans. It is constantly said that America is too young to have acquired traditions. But this is not exactly true. It is because we

are continually beginning the world again, every ten or fifteen years, that we wear that desperate look of youth. Ours is a mechanic's conviction that history is all bunk. There was never before, I suppose, a generation sent out so thinly prepared by its parents as that which went to make the Great War. The first wind from a shell shook the last metaphysical rag from our backs. We had no tradition of bravery, none of endurance; we only said, what anybody else can do, we can do. In consequence, having stomached the war as best we could, we were presently found glorifying cowardice. A little later, we were quite as ready to cover the Chicago bandits with glory because we had heard from the newspapers that they at least were brave. Ten years' experiment taught confusion. But there is no need to repeat that tale. Let us remember grandfather sitting on his front porch; or his brothers, spurred and slender in their sashes, riding off toward a battle, which may have been Bull Run and was ultimately Appomattox. They, at all events, had a tradition, which they carried with them and found as useful as a body-servant. And yet they were, as Americans, far younger than those who tell us we are still too young.

For it is to be noted that the Confederacy, for all the brevity of its formal existence, achieved more surely the qualities of a nation than the enduring Republic has been able to do. There were more emotions shared; its soldiers knew how to speak to one another or without speaking to arrive at a common understanding. Their attitude toward life was alike, and when they faced death it was in the same way. This makes for integrity, as it certainly also makes for a sounder emotional life.

II

It is not simple to say why this was so. But for one thing, Jamestown was not settled by Pilgrim Fathers. Now, I know it has been recently discovered that very few gentle-

men came to Virginia and I dare say another scholar will soon say that almost none of those who made New England were Puritans. Already we are told that more came for cod than for conscience' sake. But it will not do to let our modern obsession with numbers construe the seventeenth century; nor, because our contemporary intellectuals are ineffectual, must we suppose that the early New England theologians were anything of the sort. It required only a few men of character to set whatever thought there was, just as in Virginia we may be sure that, small though the number of gentlemen was, it was they who determined the colony's complexion.

True, Puritanism in its fine strictness and rigor did not outlast a generation; it was too uncompromising a creed for respectability, and when Jonathan Edwards tried to revive it a century later, he was cast out as a social menace. But the trick had been done, and a cast given the mind; that conscience was not henceforth to be silenced. But in the place of the old dependence on the arbitrariness of God, the younger men had begun to devise a doctrine which was later to be called self-reliance. It was they who have determined America, and they were, no less than their uncompromising fathers before them, enemies of custom.

The Puritan set out to destroy tradition; how much he made away with in England is only beginning to be understood. And on the rocks of New England, where he had nothing but hardship to oppose him, he was relentless. On the other hand, there were not so many who came South who did not hope to live as well as their plantations would allow them. And with tobacco that was very well.

This is the significance of their loyalty to the Stuarts: it may well be that they thought no more about the Divine Right of Kings than the Cape Cod fishermen did of the Divine, *tout court*; but they did subscribe to an ancient and aristocratic ordering of society. Sailing from England, they had not, like the Puritans, consciously cut from the

past. They imported customs when their pockets were empty; they made an effort for gentility, even when the wilderness decided for simplicity. And though later, using their intelligences, they, along with the other colonists, rejected the past politically, the best of them continued, as far as their purses would let them, to live traditionally, unbending in manners only so far as was necessary to fit the times. In short, they lived as well as their plantations would allow them.

So much would seem to be the fact of the Cavalier South. The myth is something else again; possibly it is more important. For when all is said and done, a myth is far more exciting to the mind than most discoveries of mere things. So long as Rome was a myth, a matter for the imagination, stirred only by a few battered columns and a dismantled Forum, Europe was able to produce an architecture from its forms, through three centuries incomparable for fecundity. But as soon as Pompeii and Herculaneum were unearthed, the facts of the Roman world uncovered, classical architecture died and in its place succeeded only the lifeless excellence of archaeology.

Just when Southerners first began to find ancestors among the adherents of the Stuarts I do not know. But I suspect that Sir Walter Scott put them on that trace. Scott was enormously read throughout the South, and he undoubtedly made more conscious a romantic disposition that was already there. For if the Cavaliers were not ancestors, they could at least be seen as antecedents. Call it a myth: grandfather's parentage was all Scotch-Irish and grandmother could name only a Jacobite great-grandfather who had come scurrying from the battle of Culloden. There still remains that assumption of charm, that very real desire to please, a high-heartedness with hope, a recklessness against odds; all of which qualities may be seen riding and fighting in Jeb Stuart's cavalry. One Stuart at least is ours authentically. No one can deny those young men their horses, their

hard riding and hard drinking, and a strange and not very thoughtful capacity for despair. They were not, if you will, very much like the pretty nobles who rode with Prince Rupert, but neither were they like those clear-eyed, stern young men who came down from Massachusetts and wrote letters home full of moral observations on the inhabitants of the Peninsula. The type persists. It has been finely portrayed by Mr. Faulkner in his "Sartoris." In the conclusion of his novel, meditating on his pilot of the last war, he suggests that his qualities are now anachronistic. Certainly, they seem to have small place in modern life. And yet it is to be wondered whether they ever made for anything more telling than admirable failure. Even at Roncevaux.

In the same way we may assume that there was in the South an aristocracy, that is to say a class which, having the wealth, also took on the power and the responsibility of rule. Everywhere—at least this is true of the past, and the past is all we know that is true—the rich, as Lorenzo de Medici has said, must have the state. But what distinguishes an aristocracy is that the government is directed in the interests of a class which acts together and whose individuals do not, as plutocrats do, destroy one another—and eventually the state—in a mean competition for privileges. It is this which gives it stability. A government by businessmen, as we have seen, not only corrupts government, but, being a cut-throat affair, frequently ends by destroying business.

An aristocratic class arises from wealth; descent has nothing to do with it at the start, though later the qualities of breeding begin to count and in the long run an aristocracy serves powerfully to mitigate the pure influence of money. Mr. Jefferson could not find any particular information of his paternal ancestors back of his grandfather; he was, however, to the curve of his calves an aristocrat; no man ever lived in more civilized elegance than the doctrinaire of Monticello. Nor did he shirk the responsibilities of rule. Manners must be acquired young. But it is not necessary to in-

herit them from forbears who, like those of Orlando, came out of the mists of the North wearing coronets on their heads. A grandfather will do, if the servants are good.

What is necessary, if a tradition is to be carried on, is that it should be inculcated in children before they have acquired minds of their own. It is too late to teach a child morality at seven. And in modern America, where the parents have given up all hope of controlling their progeny and have thrust the moral task on the school — which, in the more modern classes, is now passing it on to the children themselves — we have not only a great number of unmannerly brats, but a constantly increasing host of youthful criminals. That was where, in the South, the Negroes came in. They have, as someone said of cats and children, an “ancient and complicated culture of their own.” But what they taught the young put in their charge was not their own, but their masters’ morality. Of that they had acquired quite enough for the purpose; profoundly conservative, and possessed even as Africans of an instinct for courtesy and great tact, they were no small factor in enriching the Southern tradition. What they had to impart was of value, since they had lived always under that society to which later their charges would belong. Whereas, there is nothing, or next to nothing, that an immigrant nursemaid can pass on to an American child; she herself has been displaced and whatever she knew in Scandinavia or Ireland has already lost much of its meaning; to the child it will be of no use whatsoever.

III

Tradition is all the learning of life which men receive from the fathers and which, having tried it in their own experience, they consent to pass on to their sons. What remains is, if you will, a technique. Like anything else that is living, a tradition is in constant change. Not only does each generation have to face and survive new conditions; but what is more significant, it must, in civilized societies, come

to a new conception even of what is least changeable in human nature, its fears and appetites. Thus we find our ways of making love, eating and drinking, facing war and approaching death, subject to fashion. And in high civilizations there is a continuous succession of manners, which apply not only to the fine arts but, perhaps more essentially, to the arts of living.

Tradition is not therefore discarded; for not only is there a return after each youthful mutiny, but the change itself takes place within limits traditionally defined. Thus, a recent American writer, describing the generation of French writers who have come to maturity since the war, says of them that they are in full reaction against the *esprit français*. *Il ne veulent pas être dupes*. This is accurate enough; it only remains to be added that the desire not to be taken in is the *esprit français* and the very essence of it. Of those whom I have myself known, and they include at least two of the most violent, I should, speaking as an American, say that they were French to the bone. They are not like the generation of Anatole France, but they differ from all that one thinks of as traditionally French only in being more brilliantly alive.

The use of tradition is, as the French abundantly prove, to provide a technique of living and offer a discipline and a pride. We must live from the instincts, for the mind unsupported not only cannot tell us how to behave, it cannot give us any very satisfactory reasons for living at all. It is to be recalled that the eighteenth century, which thought itself very rational and was intelligently curious as to man's nature, soon found itself faced by a boredom with existence so profound that it had to invent a new word for it — *le néant*, which I suppose could be translated as the blind abyss of nothingness. And there was in Mr. Shaw's intellectual Ancients nothing to make us think that their existence in any way justified all the time they had spent about it. They lived from the mind, at least from Mr. Shaw's mind, which

is quite adequate for Mr. Shaw; but there was no doubt about their deficiencies the moment he compared them with the prophets and sybils of the Sistine Roof, those men and women of Michelangelo's who have grown old in passion and whose painted limbs are still tumultuously strained.

But if the instinctive life is the only one available, the time given us who are not *Ancients* to explore its possibilities is very short. It is in fact too short to spend trying to find out everything for ourselves with no dependence on what has been tried and approved by men and centuries. The assumption commonly made in America is that the machine has so altered the present from the past that nothing our parents knew is of any use to us. The answer to that, which may be a futile one, is that had we retained our integrity as men, we should never have allowed mechanization to proceed so rapidly as to destroy all that accumulated wisdom. How meagre life is without it, needs no demonstration by me. For one objection to the machine is this, that it constantly tends to force the economic problem foremost. Indeed, it may, particularly in times of crisis, make it so insistent that there is neither thought nor strength to deal with any other. And all those subtler and more passionate problems, which should engage our first attention, are left to one side, or receive only the most hurried attention. Behavior, our relations to others, men and women, our attitude towards ourselves, living in its extremest definition and in that sense which means only proper exercise of the body—all these, as Mr. John Maynard Keynes, himself no mean economist, has pointed out, are the proper studies of mankind. But so long as man is regarded simply as an economic unit, as he will be while we are content to overconsider the machine, then the only ideal that can be proposed is one of scientific efficiency. Man in the grander sense does not exist, and the human animal is atrophied. It does not seem to me to matter a great deal whether one is led to this state by Ford or Lenin, or it matters only as a choice of doctors might if we had decided

that all our problems would be simplified (as no doubt they would be) if we were made sterile.

This the poets and novelists have always known. Hence their predilection for exalted personages, or at least for those who are beyond economic necessity, either because they are well-off and, as Mr. Edmund Wilson says of Proust's characters, can afford to be neurotic, or because as vagabonds they have decided to ignore it. This also explains why serious sociological novels, unless satirical, are so profoundly unsatisfactory from the literary point of view. They displace the novelist's problem. The recent novels of John Dos Passos are in this respect instructive.

But the instincts demand a discipline. Else they are distrusted. The Yahoos never existed except in Swift's imagination, and the attempt to revive them after the war was, on the whole, a failure. A number of charming people tried their best, but their Yahooism was more apparent than real and even the momentary pretence was more than most of them could make without recourse to gin or some other stupefier. No, the danger is not that, without some form of inherited control, we shall be in for debauchery, but rather that we shall succumb to a spurious refinement, as debilitating as it is unreal, being based not on a fine sensibility but on fear. At all events that is what seems to happen in America, where the desire to be correct and to live by the advertisements tends to obliterate anything that can properly be called desire.

But their discipline should be something quite different from that recently recommended by the Humanists. For theirs was in part a counsel of exhaustion and in part a pathetic nostalgia for the small town morality of an older America, dominated by the thin spire of the white meeting-house. The art of living also has its academicians, and they are of them. Their references to the Greeks were intended only for those who would not take the trouble to look up the sources and see how far apart their counsel was from Aris-

totle and others of that violent race, who never, in their clear-sightedness, supposed, as Mr. Babbitt plainly does, that a mild happiness was the end of life. What we ask is not repression of passion, but a discipline that will in controlling it also conserve it. For this is, I take it, the secret of classical morality, in which it is opposed to romantic morality, which directs us on the road to excess in order that we may arrive at the palace of wisdom. They are opposed, but there is probably no reason why a man should not successively follow both, for even Aristotle thought it was impossible to expect moderation from the young. Drunkenness is good for youth, for they need to learn the limits of their own nature; but after a certain age it becomes necessary to know how to drink, that is to say, how to extract the utmost in pleasure from liquor without becoming either a drunkard or a boor.

Something of this inherited wisdom was certainly in the South, where the young men were allowed to be libertine and wild, and the old men were expected to lay their Horace beside the bottle of Bourbon. For theirs was a civilization of manners, and it is only through that unconscious instruction which we appropriately call being well-bred that the discipline of which I speak can be imposed. The sense of the earth was strong in them, so that they could not cultivate many illusions as to the ultimate improvement of mankind. But in the meantime, their manners gave them assurance and, because they knew that the use of civilities is to keep others at a distance, they preserved integrity. There is even today among the poorest Southerners a self-respect, a sense of their worth as men, regardless of what they have done or accumulated, that sets them apart from the more successful American who is lost without his bank-book and recognizes no pride but that of achievement.

IV

I have possibly, in insisting on the Southern tradition, represented it as being richer than it ever actually was. I

have indeed meant to put it at its best; and though I have been accused of having elsewhere shown it as already in decline before the Civil War, I had rather accept that accusation than try to prove the contrary. What is true is that of the several social revolutions which America has undergone, the South escaped the effects of the first two. The separation of the colonies from England left her with the upper classes secure on their plantations. Jefferson seems to have affected his Virginia neighbors more by his example as a highly civilized country gentleman with a taste for architecture and gardening than by his writings as a democratic doctrinaire. Jackson and his followers certainly did attain the tradition; but the full effects of the backwoods rebellion were not greatly evident before the divisions of armed conflict in the 'sixties revealed them. Of the Civil War and the Populist Revolt it is not necessary to speak. That they were disastrous to the traditional manner of living is tragically evident.

The South developed the virtues of an agrarian civilization. In some respects that civilization was poor. How account for that poverty, in literature let us say, as well as for a decline in the quality of Southern thought even where it had been most vigorous, in politics? It sprang, I should say, less from the exasperating presence of slavery in an age which could not well defend it, than from the South's rapid increase in size without a corresponding increase in means of communication. There were no cities to serve as centres of attraction. We cannot read the contemporary records of those marvellously talented Virginians who declared for independence and set the Republic on its foundations without being struck by the intense realism of their minds. They were critical as the statesmen of the Confederacy did not dare to be. And no small part of this vigor and alertness is to be traced to their conversations. They were, it appears, in constant contact with one another. Their wits were edged by talk, their idiosyncrasies corrected, their courage confirmed. In a word, they were worldly men, which is what

statesmen ought to be. Williamsburg was a capital such as Richmond never was, and Alexandria heard more sound sense than has since been talked beside the Potomac.

So it is that we return to this tradition, not because it was romantic, but because it was, in so many ways, right. Grandfather as he sits on the front porch in the hazy heat of a summer afternoon is not an heroic figure. But he is a solid one and that not only in the sense of those too, too many pounds of flesh. He was clear as to his political position. And though there were many even then who saw him as out of his times, pathetic in the stubbornness of his eighteenth-century opinions, a late time has confounded his opponents. He saw that there must be a symmetry between agriculture and industry; that if you import labor for exploitation you must let it breed but not govern; while a Republic was doubtless the most propitious form of government for Americans, it would last and hold its integrity only so long as you did not let it become a real democracy. His opinions were sound; only one wishes he had not been so nervous about them. He mixed his juleps and pointed his country manners; he had, alas, only a realistic conception of justice, so that, unlike our present state, with its noble experiments and its perfectly moral laws, his jails were empty.

So it is, when we discover that without a past we are living not in the present, but in a vague and rather unsatisfactory future, we turn back to him. And suddenly even his fat becomes eloquent, for it speaks of imperfection. His day was simpler than ours. That is not to say, it cannot instruct us. And we have this for our encouragement, that if there is anything profitable we can learn from him, it will have come from a man who had not only his social attachments but also his lonely being. That is a start, and a good one, in these days when everyone is ready to make a civilization in which nothing so fallible as grandfather will be left, but all will be ordered for the best in the best of dehumanized worlds.